LINGUISTICS

SOME PROBLEMS IN HISTORICAL DIALECTOLOGY*

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Historical dialectology has developed to a different degree for different languages. Although language historians refer to it quite frequently, nevertheless historical dialectology is treated on the whole as a peripheral phenomenon. This situation results among other things from the fact that the dialect data available for investigation come not from a living informant but from written records. This imposes a number of constraints and limitations on the historical dialectologist and forces him to give up a number of well established research techniques and procedures available to contemporary dialect research. E.g. it is often impossible to verify language data, which in historical dialectology, as in historical linguistics in general, are often nothing but reconstructions removed a step or more from what was actually produced by speakers of a given language a few centuries ago.

This, of course, does not mean that research in historical dialectology is impossible or is of no purpose at all but it only indicates that the scope of investigations and the techniques will vary from age to age and from one area to another.

The scale of research will primarily depend on the number of MSS, whose localization is possible (both on linguistic and extralinguistic grounds). E.g. in late Middle English (1350—1450) there is a real abundance of MSS. Over 500 of them contain longer literary pieces. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* have survived in sixty-seven MSS and *Prick of Conscience* (1340) in at least as many

as 117 MSS copied in various localities, which gives the dialectologist good evidence concerning geographical variation of the English language of the period.

Before we concentrate on a more detailed discussion of any particular issue that historical dialectologist will have to deal with, it will be in order to survey, though briefly, the more general tasks facing historical dialectology. These tasks can be roughly divided into two groups:

(a) STATIC (or synchronic), i.e. establishing isoglosses (consequently producing atlases) for certain periods in the history of a language, as e.g. for the English language of 1000—1100 or 1350—1450.

(b) DYNAMIC, i.e. accounting for changes in dialect boundaries, shifts of isoglosses (e.g. $h\text{-}\rightarrow\emptyset$ in English), disappearing of enclaves, etc.

To handle these tasks, the historical dialectologist has three basic sources of data:

(1) MSS from a given period of the history of a language;

(2) onomastics, both contemporary and past;

(3) contemporary dialects.

MSS constitute the basic source. They are of particular value where there was no standard national vernacular with a well established and normalized orthography. In the case of the existence of the latter, errors and slips of the pen will be the major source of dialectal information.[1]

As is well known, the English language did not develop any national standard until the end of the 15th century. There were, however, several regional standards. This does not mean that there was a complete chaos in the orthography. Apart from existing idiosyncrasies of particular scribes or even scriptoria, medieval English MSS on the whole exhibit surprising consistency and regularity characteristic of the area where a given MS came into existence.

Not all MSS have the same value for historical dialectology. A ME scribe copying MSS could either copy the MS without an error and without any deliberate change (this is extremely rare although not impossible), or he could consistently introduce changes reflecting his own dialect (orthographic, morphological or lexical). He could also be inconsistent producing something in between, with forms from the original side by side with his own modifications. The first two types are fundamental as sources for historical dialectology. The third type, most frequent, is dangerous at the incipient stage of dialectological investigations and on the whole has little value for the analysis of the graphic/phonic aspects of a written text because the lack of consistency too often excludes the possibility of capturing regularities in the orthography

which in turn does not make it possible to reconstruct phonetic aspects of writing.

An interesting example of an unusually competent scribe was the man who copied MS Harley 2409 (British Museum). This MS contains four texts written by the same hand consistently in four different dialects (McIntosh 1963:398).

The second type of MS, i.e. the translation from dialect to dialect, is quite frequent. The 117 copies of *Prick of Conscience* belong to this category. The importance of this type of MS for dialectal research was underestimated until recently.

Because there was no national standard English until the end of 15th century, MSS containing literary works play an important role in dialect studies. As a matter of fact they form the basis of the most exhaustive research project in the area to date, i.e. that of McIntosh and Samuels.

Although official documents in the vernacular are scarce before 1450, they should not be ignored. Likewise *Lay Subsidy Rolls* and *Assize Rolls*, and in fact any lists of names in legal documents in Latin or French are extremely important and should not be ignored either (cf. Arngart 1949; Kristensson 1965, 1967, 1976; Sundby 1963). The nature of these documents (e.g. tax-rolls) guarantees a high degree of reliability of writing. Misspellings of names of tax-payers might cause problems when collecting taxes. Orthographic variations, it seems, must have reflected variations in the phonetic reality, which is essential for the reconstruction of pronunciation and consequently for the establishment of isoglosses. Official documents from before 1400 useful for dialectologist are in most cases limited to names, and in fact constitute the bulk of medieval onomastic records.

The onomastic evidence, not only medieval but even contemporary, helps historical dialectologists to determine the distribution of some of the isoglosses. E.g. reflexes of ME $\bar{e}/\bar{e}$ in Modern English place names allow us to substantially supplement the ME records and establish more exactly the lines dividing ME $\bar{e}/\bar{e}$ areas (Pogatscher 1901, Brandl 1915), cf. *Stratfield*, *Stratford*, *Stratton* vs. *Streatham*, *Streatley*, *Stretford*. (The line in the north runs roughly from *Thetford* (Suffolk) through *Essex*, *Hertfordshire*, *Cambridge*, *Huntingdon*, *Oxfordshire*, *Gloucester*, *Warwick* to the *Severn* and *Bristol*.) The use of medieval place names has been advocated since the beginning of our century and has been successfully used to supplement the dialect information provided by literary MSS, most recently by Cavers (1977) and earlier by Ekwall (1913, 1938), Gevenich (1918), Serjeantson (1927), Wyld and to some extent Oakden (1930). Ekwall's work is particularly illuminating. His analysis has proved that the $\bar{a}/\bar{o}$ line ran south of the Humber before 1400 (see map 1 — line B, p. 8).

Contemporary dialects help to verify phonetic reconstructions (cf. Lass 1976:105ff) and to establish more accurately a number of ME isophones, e.g. $\bar{e}$ vs. $\bar{i}$ in words like ME *mēs/mīs* 'mice' or ME *lēs/līs* 'lice' (Jordan 193:463).

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[1] In our further considerations we will draw on the evidence from late Middle English (1350—1450), although the conclusions reached finally are applicable to other periods of English history as well as to other languages.

When using the evidence from contemporary onomastics and contemporary dialects one has to remember that in the history of English a number of isoglosses may have moved from their Middle English or early Modern English original position and the value of our evidence for historical dialectology will thus be limited and will have to be treated with a large degree of caution. Cf. eModE kl-, gl- vs. tl-, dl- (Fisiak 1979) or the $\bar{a}/\bar{\varphi}$ boundary mentioned above. As for kl->tl- and gl->dl- Wright (1905) found tl- for kl- still in Somerset whereas Orton et al. (1962—71) do not record it there and in some other areas at all and today the isogloss runs quite far to the north of London in comparison with earlier dialect records.

When preparing a dialect atlas for a historical period about which information can be only recovered from the sources described above (i.e. written documents, onomastics and modern dialects), historical dialectologists face a number of problems which are far from being solved. Below, four such fundamental problems (there are many more) will be discussed briefly.

1. *What span of time can be recognized as a sufficiently homogeneous unit for a description of dialects so that a historical change is not accepted as a dialect feature?*

Can it be 50, 100 or more years? Oakden (1930), which is in fact the first dialect survey, though limited, covers 1180—1467. Moore, Meech and Whitehall (1935) have used the ME material from 12th until 15th century, although basically concentrating on 1400—50, i.e. three centuries, as if they had to do with a synchronic unity, McIntosh (1963) and Samuels (1963) suggest 100 years, Kristensson takes 60 years (1290—1350). Sundby (1963) goes even further and has taken fifty years as the span of time constituting a reasonably unitary stretch in his research although, according to him, a hundred years could be equally feasible under certain conditions. There is no principled solution to this problem. So far only practical considerations determined whether it should be a hundred years or more. It seems that ideally a life span of one generation should be a time unit for historical dialectology but in practice it is often impossible to follow this proposal rigidly for the lack of a sufficient number of appropriate written records. It has also been pointed out elsewhere (Sundby 1963) that languages change at a different pace at different times and the decision concerning the time span should be primarily determined by this factor. In view of this the period of 100 years for late Middle English seems to be fully justified, whereas any attempt to make an atlas of dialects following Oakden or Moore, Meech and Whitehall is doomed to failure. In conclusion, one is still forced to stress that the element of arbitrariness remains as is always the case with establishing chronological units in the history of a language.

2. *How many features guarantee adequate characterization of dialects?*

McIntosh and Samuels in their *Atlas of the dialects of later Middle English* operate with a few hundred items, Oakden with 45 and others with only a few (Moore et al. exploit only 11 features). It is obvious that the larger the number of features, the more adequate the characterization of dialects. The selection of given items from a larger number should in the first place be based on the frequency of occurrence of these items.

3. *What should be the density of coverage, i.e. what should be the ratio of informants (in our case — MSS) to the square area and the population?*

In contemporary dialect researches the proportion of informants to the population is 1 : 50000 (e.g. *Linguistic atlas of Scotland*). McIntosh and Samuels have achieved the figure 1 : 6000 for late Middle English and one MS per each fifty square miles of the country. A situation like this is more than ideal and on the whole, one should make it clear, it cannot be found in early stages of the history of many languages. The best gauge as to a relative

phonologically, are thereby transformed, from being verifiable pieces of information arrived at directly from the graphic substance, into debatable derivative conjectures. As such they hardly constitute satisfactory material for entry on maps. Indeed... the entry on maps of written forms assessable so to speak in their own right must be carried out before any detailed phonological or phonetic interpretation of them can be attempted".

Working with historical dialects from Old to early Modern English one wonders to what extent this attitude is acceptable and justifiable.

It is undeniably true that written texts "also manifest other new distinctions of their own, distinctions which are in no sense a reflection of, or correlation with, anything in the spoken language" (McIntosh 1956 : 39) and the work of McIntosh and Samuels, based entirely on orthography without relying on reconstructed phonology or phonetics, has contributed vastly (even though it is available only in Edinburgh) to a more detailed characterization of ME dialects, even though from a different point of view than thus far attempted. At the same time, however, it seems that it is only complementary with the phonic characterization, and forms another dimension of the description at times and places parallel to the latter. If the purpose of dialect research is STATIC, i.e. its aim is to produce an atlas of a language like LME at a given time, the use of the graphic evidence alone is fully justifiable. However, when a more complete characterization is to be achieved, the phonic aspect, although derivative and conjectural cannot be ignored. A complete picture of historical dialectology can be gained only if both the static and dynamic issues are fully exploited.

The phonic aspect of historical dialectology cannot be discarded and replaced by orthographic information if the aim of dialectal research is dynamic in nature.[3] To account successfully for the origin of certain phenomena in contemporary dialects as well as to trace the development of dialects from LME in terms of their internal developments, influences, boundary shifts, etc., one needs phonetic and phonological information of the past, even if reconstructed with the techniques and procedures currently available.

The possibility of reconstructing the phonetic aspects of the past has greatly increased in recent years. Lass (1976, 1977 and 1978) has convincingly demonstrated that the orthoepic, genetic, typological, comparative and contemporary dialect evidence used in a principled way can provide enough information for a fairly detailed phonetic reconstruction[4] (cf. Lass' reconstruction of ME [a] in Lass 1976 and OE [r] in Lass 1977). Subscribing to his views almost entirely, the inevitable conclusion is that *isophones* are as real in his-

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